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ABSTRACT

The literature on career counseling and lesbian women was reviewed resulting in the identification of 10 maxims regarding providing career counseling to lesbian women. The maxims are as follows: (1) sexual orientation is essential information when providing career counseling; (2) it is important that the workplace be lesbian-affirming; (3) lesbian women have nothing to protect them from discrimination on the job; (4) potential violence must be discussed; (5) ongoing career counseling needs to be considered for the lesbian woman's career planning; (6) there are several positive aspects to a lesbian being "out" on the job; (7) there are several negative aspects to a lesbian being "out" on the job; (8) not all lesbians fit into the stereotypical careers of lesbian women; (9) geography may be crucial; and (10) if a lesbian is partnered, couples counseling needs to be considered. Each of these maxims was discussed in detail. The discussion of the maxim regarding lesbian women's ongoing career counseling needs was accompanied by tables listing 20 colleges in 12 states that have been identified as being accepting of the gay community and 20 colleges in 15 states that have been identified as being against the expression of alternative lifestyles. (Contains 17 references.) (MN)

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Providing Career Counseling to Lesbian Women

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Abstract

This paper integrates literature regarding career counseling and important considerations for career counselors working with lesbian women. Ten enlightening maxims provide information and guidelines in an effort to institute adequate services to this hidden minority.

Providing Career Counseling to Lesbian Women

Sexual orientation workplace issues have been ignored or inadequately addressed in most organizations (Powers, 1996). In an attempt to promote career counselors from partaking in this quandary, the following information provides fundamental information to be considered when working with lesbian women. Many career counselors already have lesbian clients who are seeking career development services without knowledge of the special career development needs of their lesbian clients (Pope, 1996).

Regarding the impact of one's career choice and how it relates to other aspects of our existence, Ellis (1996) acknowledged that the satisfaction we receive from our lives and how we define ourselves are of critical importance surrounding our career choices. In this paper, ten maxims provide important considerations to career counselors who work with lesbian women. From being aware of a woman's sexual orientation and making your workspace lesbian affirming, to providing information regarding how to get your hands on information about harassment and legal rights and the positive and negative aspects of a lesbian being out at her place of employment are all available.

Maxim 1: Sexual Orientation Is Essential Information When Providing Career Counseling

When providing career counseling to lesbians, it is important to note that sexual orientation is not considered in any career inventories or assessment procedures (Gelberg & Chojnacki, 1996). If the career counselor is unaware of the client's sexual orientation, many of these inventories and assessments may be misleading or ineffective for the client. Career counselors frequently provide services regarding resume writing, yet resume resource books typically do not provide examples on the subject of coming out or not coming out on the resume (Gelberg and Chojnacki). This can be accomplished through discussion to include or exclude

topics the lesbian woman may need to consider including on her resume; for example, volunteer work, group or organization membership, or previous employment that reveals sexual orientation.

A great deal of antagonism toward lesbians continues, making her sexual orientation a definite handicap when approaching many employers (Bolles, 1998). As a career counselor, it is important to consider whether or not to encourage a lesbian woman to disclose her sexual orientation within the workplace (Badgett, 1996). When deliberating, it is vital to understand the dynamics of multiple identities in a society that justifies its division of labor based on characteristics such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation (Rosabal, 1996).

Lesbian women also find it necessary to take into consideration several decisions that need not be considered by non-lesbian women. Not only the decision of disclosure or concealment of her lesbianism is necessary; additionally, she must consider when to disclose and how to disclose. Furthermore, as both a woman and a lesbian, she also needs to know how to handle discrimination in the workplace. Likewise, she may need to address how to handle relationship issues on the job.

The interview process also needs to be considered, particularly pertaining to gathering information regarding the organization. Lesbians will want to collect information regarding the level of heterosexism that may be encountered on the job in order to make better career choices. However, this is often extremely difficult to do without self-disclosure of her lesbian identity, yet through this self-disclosure she may eliminate herself from the possibility for obtaining employment.

Maxim 2: It Is Important That Your Workspace Be Lesbian-affirming

Providing a lesbian-affirmative environment can enhance the integration of a lesbian identity and a fulfilling career choice. Bieschke and Matthews (1996) discuss the decision-making process a lesbian may employ when deciding whether to be out to her career counselor. Habitual behaviors of the counselor with all clients have a great influence on this decision (Bieschke & Matthews). Outward behavior such as employing people who are openly lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered or queer sends a clear message of acceptance to your clients. Implementing an anti-discrimination policy can be an expression of open acceptance.

Moreover, the physical setting can include lesbian-identified written materials and symbols that may be significant, such as a rainbow flag, an inverted pink or black triangle, or a double women's symbol. Another way of being lesbian-affirming is to have a list of resources readily available for your clients. Available from the American College Personnel Association Standing Committee for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Awareness. This organization maintains resource directories, e-mail addresses for organizations, general mailing lists, diversity-based mailing lists, user net news groups, and commercial subscriptions services (Gelberg & Chojnacki, 1996).

Maxim 3: Lesbian Women Have Nothing to Protect Them From Discrimination On the Job

There is currently no federal job protection for non-straight individuals in the private sector (Winfeld & Spielman, 2000). Therefore, when arriving at the workplace, most lesbians are vulnerable to discrimination from which non-lesbian women and non-gay men are legally protected. Because a woman's sexual orientation is sometimes easily hidden, the option of hiding it at the workplace is often chosen by lesbians to avoid social ostracism, physical violence or other sanctions imposed by her employer. Career counselors must work to minimize the risk of

discrimination while allowing lesbian workers to find a level of disclosure that is both personally comfortable and functional (Badgett, 1996).

Counselors must acknowledge differences in the treatment of workers within workplaces due to racism. Lesbian women of color face triple minority status. This combination mandates special consideration.

Harassment remains a significant safety issue at the workplace, and with the lack of legal protection, lesbians may be fired, may be denied employment or promotion, may be emotionally, verbally or physically harassed on the job, and may be denied benefits for her partner based on her lesbianism. These are some examples that require a lesbian to conduct job searches in a different manner than the non-lesbian population (Gelberg & Chojnacki, 1996).

Career counselors need to present information to their lesbian clients regarding advocacy groups that can provide information regarding legal protection within some agencies and legal resources for discrimination. This information can be attained from the American Civil Liberties Union, and The Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund (Gelberg & Chojnacki, 1996).

Maxim 4: Potential Violence Must Be Discussed

Homophobia in the workplace is a common issue faced by lesbian women. Homophobia may be expressed as harassment, which may span from mental cruelty to out-and-out violence including hate mail sent via e-mail; hate-filled statements on telephone messages; and graffiti used to deface offices, work stations, or other personal belongings (Winfeld & Spielman, 2000). For their safety, lesbians may actively choose not to come out (Ellis, 1996). Fears may force lesbians to remain invisible to negotiate and survive the hostile work environment.

Institutional homophobia is expressed in various methods, such as disregarding sexual orientation in its nondiscrimination policy or not providing access to benefits and resources to

partners. Moreover, the absence of inclusive language, such as "partner" or "significant other", and excluding unmarried same-sex significant others in invitations to corporate events are illustrations of institutionalized homophobia (Winfeld & Spielman, 2000).

Maxim 5: Ongoing Career Counseling Needs To Be Considered For the Lesbian Woman's Career Planning

Unlike other minority groups in which vocational development occurs within the context of an enduring identity, many lesbians do not become aware of their identity until adolescence or adulthood, when they may already be actively engaged in career planning. Coming out to oneself and to others may thwart the vocational development of lesbian women in several critical ways (Fassinger, 1996). Coming out may result in occupational stereotyping, thereby eliminating possible career options because of beliefs that some occupations might be hostile to, or associated with lesbians. Therefore, a lesbian woman may find herself, presented with the opportunity or necessity to begin a new career search during various developmental stages in her life.

When considering the type of training or amount of education required for careers of interest, the lesbian woman needs to know where to attain this training or education. This necessitates providing information regarding the colleges or trade schools that may be more accepting of lesbians. Oftentimes women are expelled due to rumors of her sexual orientation, regardless if she is out or not. Private religious schools have been cited as being the least excepting of lesbians (Mardesich, 2001). Franek, Meltzer, and Owens (2001) book *The Best 331* Colleges identified several colleges that students reported as being accepting of the gay community, found in Table 1.

Table 1

Accepting of the Gay Community

State	College
California	Pitzer College
Connecticut	Connecticut College
Florida	New College of the University of South Florida
Georgia	Wesleyan University
Iowa	Grinnell College
Maine	Colby College
Massachusetts	Smith College, Simon's Rock College of Bard, Mount Holyoke College, and Boston University
Minnesota	Macalester College
New Jersey	Drew University
New York	New York University, Wells College, Sara Lawrence, Vassar College, and Barnard College
Oregon	Reed College and Lewis & Clark
Vermont	Goddard College

Franek, Meltzer, and Owens also identified several colleges that students reported being against the expression of alternative life styles, found in Table 2.

Table 2

Against the Expression of Alternative Lifestyles

State	College
Connecticut	University of Connecticut
Florida	University of Miami
Illinois	Wheaton College and Knox College
Indiana	University of Notre Dame and Hanover College
Maryland	Johns Hopkins University
Massachusetts	Boston College and College of the Holy Cross
Michigan	University of Michigan—Ann Arbor
New Jersey	Seton Hall University
North Carolina	Duke University
Ohio	Denson University
Pennsylvania	Grove City College and Dickinson College
South Carolina	Wofford College
Texas	University of Dallas and Austin College
Utah	Brigham Young University
Virginia	Hampton University

Bridgewater State College (BSC), in Bridgewater, Massachusetts, has the philosophy that colleges have an institutional responsibility to protect and help students. To assume this responsibility, BSC provides financial assistance in the form of a scholarship to openly lesbian

and gay students that have been rejected by family and whose families refuse to provide assistance for their education (Brune, 2001).

Career mobility is also an important consideration for a lesbian woman. For example, a closeted lesbian who is involved in a relationship and is given a job transfer faces difficulties. This may mandate her partner move and seek employment within a new location. Termination or new employment opportunities cause similar difficulties.

Maxim 6: Positive Aspects Regarding a Lesbian Being 'Out' on the Job

Being an out lesbian in the workplace has several benefits. Rather than utilizing a great amount of energy to conceal one's identity, energy can be focused on job performance. The anxiety of being "found out" or black mailed can also be eliminated. The out lesbian worker need not be concerned with monitoring her conversations in regards to pronouns, her home life, or leisure activities. She may also eliminate concern about attending work-related social events alone or with a phony escort (Rosabal, 1996). Employers may presume that lesbians are less likely to marry (a man), and quit her job or take time off to raise a family. A lower level of avoidance of social interactions that may contribute to advancement and job satisfaction which, in turn, could lead to an increase in productivity and income (Badgett, 1996).

Further positive aspects of being out on the job at the personal level include emotional health which incorporates the ethics of honesty and integrity, self-validation, and support from those around you. On a more professional level, an out lesbian can function as a role model for other lesbians, she can seek to cultivate openness in relationships with co-workers, and desensitize colleagues toward the issue of inequalities, including sexual inequalities. On a political level, lesbians can educate others about lesbian existence and empower herself and

others in the process (Humphrey, 1999; Pope, 1996). This may result in domestic partner benefits and having the opportunity to bring partners to work-sponsored events.

Maxim 7: Negative Aspects Regarding a Lesbian Being 'Out' on the Job

Prior to deciding to disclose her lesbian identity, the lesbian woman must compare the benefits of not being out to the possible costs of coming out. The value of the costs and benefits will very from individual to individual.

When a lesbian is out, she may be accused of forcing her life style on others. An example of this would be the placement of a picture of a loved one oh her desk. When a photograph is displayed on a non-lesbian's desk, it is viewed as the person sharing that part of her life. Conversely, if lesbian does the same, she may be accused of flaunting her sexual orientation or pushing her lesbianism onto others (Rosabal, 1996). Sometimes subtle messages are encountered, like "It's okay to be lesbian as long as you keep it quiet/don't flaunt it/don't try to impose it on me or anyone else in the company" (Powers, 1996).

Expressing one's lesbian identity may suggest the potential for joining other lesbian or gay employees in collective action that challenges existing employment practices and the workplace environment (Badgett, 1996). Consequently, this may lead to an employer avoiding the hiring of lesbians in an attempt to prevent having to consider these practices as well as the social environment.

When a woman finds herself the only out lesbian, she may be asked to juggle multiple time demands that are typically not taken into consideration when promotion is considered. For example, she may be expected to take part in several committees in order to represent the minority non-heterosexual group. Additionally, she may also be asked to speak and present information regarding 'her people' to groups, training seminars, or classes (Rosabal, 1996).

Maxim 8: Not All Lesbians Fit Into the Stereotypical Careers of Lesbian Women

Some employers believe lesbians should not be hired in specific positions (Pope, 1996). While some lesbians choose not to challenges stereotypes, many others do. These lesbians often find themselves in careers that are often not considered lesbian-friendly. These careers may include day care workers, school counselors, social workers, and ministers. Lesbians may choose career options that are traditionally 'women's work'. They are employed as secretaries, hairdressers, seamstresses, waitresses, teachers and nurses. Additionally, lesbians are often found in the more nontraditional careers such as doctors, lawyers, massage therapists, dentists, machinists, truck drivers, engineers, electricians, plumbers, or construction workers.

In a *San Francisco Examiner's* survey 19% of lesbian women identified that her sexual orientation played a major role in selecting her job or profession (Badgett, 1996). This may be due to the fact that many lesbians do not rely on financial support of a man; therefore being able to earn a livable income is crucial. Consequently, lesbians may be apt to consider more nontraditional (and usually more highly paid) careers. Conversely, Hall and Peevey (1997) found that even when matched for education, occupation, and other factors lesbians averaged 10 to 30 percent less in earnings than non-lesbian women (as cited in Badgett, 1996).

Maxim 9: Geography May Be Crucial

Very few states provide nondiscrimination laws in the United States. As of January of 2000, eleven states offer nondiscrimination laws (Winfeld and Spielman, 2000). Those states include: California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Wisconsin. Eight states have executive orders barring discrimination in public employment regarding sexual orientation. These states are Colorado,

Iowa, Maryland, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Washington (Winfeld & Spielman, 2000). There are also approximately 180 to 200 cities with ordinances barring employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Oftentimes large urban areas are more likely to have tolerant attitudes as (Fassinger, 1995). Moreover, if the work environment is homophobic, the lesbian woman will have more opportunities for supportive environments outside of her career in larger cities. For additional, current information regarding gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender civil rights laws in the United States, counselors can visit the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force web site at http://www.ngltf.org.

Maxim 10: If Partnered, Couples Counseling Needs to be Considered

If involved in a relationship, prior to making the decision of being out on job or concealing one's identity, the lesbian must consider the consequences for her significant other. Therefore, couples counseling with dual career lesbian families must be taken into account. Dissonant couples (one person is out and the other is closeted) are of noteworthy importance. With one partner out, the other is at continuous risk of being unintentionally outed. This can lead to additional stress within the relationship. The possible consequences of being out on the job along with these additional stressors have been presented previously.

In conclusion, as an organization, career counselors can effectively fulfill the needs of their lesbian clients by partaking in the ten maxims provided. The career counselor recognizing sexual orientation as an essential aspect of lesbians' decision-making process regarding her career options is crucial. Understanding the importance of having a lesbian-affirming workspace is essential. Knowing the laws regarding discrimination and having information at one's fingertips is also helpful when counseling a lesbian woman. As a career counselor, being able to inform lesbians about the advantages and disadvantages of being out at her place of employment,

as well as the potential violence she faces, can only assist her in making appropriate decisions. Knowledge of lesbian friendly educational institutions, and geographical areas where she may consider residing is crucial. Being conscious of the need for on going career counseling and couples counseling will benefit the lesbian woman as well. Finally, knowing that lesbians do not necessarily fit into stereotypical categories of employment opportunities is vital. Implementing the information within the maxims provided, the career counselor will provide beneficial services to the lesbian population; thus improving her quality of life.

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